

Diplomatic champion of wide public health issues

Immigration is a hot political issue. The dominant debate is how rich countries can restrict the entry of migrants from poor countries. But other voices, including that of the campaigning global health charity Medact, are questioning the "fortress" strategies. Its president, **Dr June Crown**, talked to Tessa Richards

The European Union wants to harmonise asylum policies across Europe and rewrite the 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees. Both moves are aimed at restricting immigration to Europe. In the United Kingdom, politicians are vying to talk tough on immigration in the run-up to the election.

The fact that these moves are occurring against a groundswell of opinion and increasing evidence that immigration makes economic sense (*Economist* 2001; Mar 31:13-4) is a paradox. They also ignore the serious humanitarian and health issues raised by restricting immigration and ignoring the underlying causes.

The awful deaths of refugees who paid illegal traffickers to smuggle them into Britain in a container lorry provoked an outcry. The misery experienced by most of those who come here has not. Once they have arrived in Britain, they face bureaucratic hoops, arbitrary detainment and dispersal, lack of educational and social support, and having to use food vouchers rather than cash for their daily needs. Distress and mental health problems are being exacerbated and integration delayed.

Watching Dr Crown, who recently retired as director of the South East Institute of Public Health, skilfully chair a conference last week to discuss migration and health was illuminating.

Given that Dr Crown is in many ways an establishment figure she is not, at first glance, an obvious person to be president of a campaigning organisation that describes itself as "challenging social and environmental barriers to health." Her evident strength lies in her diplomatic skills and authoritative handling of complex and controversial issues.

Born in 1938, she says that her

earliest memories are of going to bed in an Anderson shelter in the Black Country and being lifted up by her father to see the glow of bomb ravaged Coventry. At grammar school in Cheltenham, where her family moved when she was

also saw how effectively they used their academic skills to influence health policy debates."

Full of enthusiasm, she persuaded the authorities in Brent and Harrow to create a post for her in the new specialty of public health in 1974. Her understanding area medical officer helped to engineer a part time contract so she could pick up her three young children from school.

Dr Crown joined the Medical Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons (which merged in 1992 with the Medical Association for the Prevention of War to become Medact) in the 1970s.

She soon became well briefed on the health effects on civilians of armed conflict. Ironically, one of her first jobs in Brent and Harrow was to produce an action plan to be adopted

"We aim to provide evidence for their impact on health and persuade decision makers to promote effective policy action," says Dr Crown.

Public health interventions require good multidisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration. Dr Crown's record on this front is impressive. As president of the Faculty of Public Health Medicine (1995-8), she succeeded in establishing the faculty as a foundation member of the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and started the process of incorporation of non-medical members into the faculty. She also crossed sensitive territorial boundaries to harness support for the Review of Prescribing (the Crown report) that recommends the extension of prescribing rights to health professionals other than doctors and dentists.

In her work with Medact she has supported discussions with defence and armed services experts on the health impact of war on civilians and the potential of mediation as a means of resolving conflicts without violence.

A common thread in her work is a commitment to widen views about the role of doctors. "Anyone who qualifies in medicine who can't put two sentences together about the impact of third world debt on health is not adequately trained," she says.

"Students must be taught to recognise their wider professional responsibilities. There is an awful lot of talk about equity as an over-riding value in health, but not enough is being done to tackle health divides."

Fresh from a "retirement" job working on an EU funded project in Russia, she is more passionate than ever about the need for doctors to lift their eyes above the horizon. Returning to the issues around migration, she points out that Vladimir Putin is talking about Russia importing migrant labour because of falling birth rates and high mortality rates, especially among young men. Smoking, alcohol, accidents, violence, and suicide are major causes of this premature mortality. Part of her work in helping set up regional strategic plans for health has been to convince local experts about the value of preventive measures.

"It's been one of the most exciting and worthwhile things I have ever done." □

Details about Medact can be accessed at www.medact.org.



Medact's president, June Crown: globalisation is high on its agenda

eight, she was influenced by a "dynamic head" who campaigned for human rights and instilled the notion of world citizenship.

After studying medicine at Cambridge and London, she went into pathology before doing an MSc at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

"It was heady stuff," she says. "Inspirational figures such as Jerry Morris and Brian Abel Smith made me aware that medicine was not just about treating disease but about tackling the wider determinants of health. I

ed in the event of nuclear bombardment.

"We were, absurdly, instructed to plan our bus route so that in the event of nuclear conflagration we could go and collect blankets and syringes."

Over the past nine years, Medact has tackled a wide range of issues that have an impact on health. Third world debt, migration of populations from conflict zones, increasing population mobility, and the health effects of globalisation are high on its agenda.